



Cadet Honors Father By Living Out His Dream

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By Tiamoyo Harris

Young people have various reasons for joining the Army. Some join because they feel it is their patriotic duty. Others take the oath to follow in the footsteps of their family members. The military has a history of also honing men and women, whom may be indecisive about their life plans, with leadership and life skills. For CIET Cadet Sasha Neal, of Gatlinburg, Tennessee, her father, the late Sgt. 1st Class Raymond Edison Jones Jr., is her inspiration as to why she took the oath.

Jones was killed in Beyji, Iraq in 2004 when a rocket-propelled grenade struck him while on patrol.

"It's patriotic at this point. I honor him. I know that one day when I go to heaven, he's gotta salute me," Neal, 20, said.

"It's scary. Everything is scary at first, but then something happens and I look to my left and to my right and I see my battles and I see the people that have sat there besides me the whole time."

By the end of training, Neal hopes to be adequately prepared for her MS III year in training. She wants a full-

time career in the Army, branching artillery in the regular Army. She also wants to apply her psychology degree that she is working on as a rising junior at Carson-Newman University.

“She’s always willing to pick up new knowledge, and wants to go above and beyond which is big in active duty,” her best friend Sgt. Lucas Collins, stationed in Fort Bragg, North Carolina said.

Collins, is one of the many mentors and military officials who saw potential in Neal, and to whom she looks up to and seeks advice from frequently. Her mother, Jamilyn Moore, however, was not as keen on the idea of her daughter joining the military initially. Outside of Moore’s late ex-husband Jones, she has a military history that stretches back a few generations in her family. Her grandmother was one of the first to join the Army Nursing Corps. Her great-grandfather served in Vietnam and some of Neal’s uncles also served in the military.

Moore knew the military all too well, and only hoped for her daughter to get an education. Still, Moore was the only one present when Jones took his oath, and decades later, Moore stood firm being the only one present when her daughter was sworn in.

“Honestly it feels like something that happens to other people. It’s really a cross between pride and terror,” Moore said. “I know that we have to have our Soldiers but I used to wonder why does it have to be my baby?”

Moore had memories of living the military life with Jones, even living in Germany briefly. She moved back to Florida, where she and her husband met, briefly after they got divorced and made the final move to Tennessee a few months after. However, Neal only knew her father vicariously, having only seen him two or three times in her life.

Most families learn of the death in combat of a loved one through a military official visit to the house. Unfortunately, Neal wasn’t graced with that experience. At the age of nine, Neal heard her mother scream in the duplex next door, and a glass break. She knew then something was wrong. Days later, Neal asked her mother what happened to her dad. Moore sat her daughter down in the garage, and showed her a USA Today paper. Nine columns over and six rows down, she saw her father’s face and her world as she knew it changed.



Sasha Neal and her mother Jamilyn Moore

Since Jones had remarried, Neal and her mother did not get the official word of his death from the Army. However, months later after Moore made a few phone calls, and a military official showed up at their front door thanking Neal for her father's service and presented the nine-year-old with an American flag.

"She needed some type of closure and not a picture in the paper," Moore said.

"A lot of kids would take a tragedy and go south, she just didn't do that, she pushed through."

Moore continued to let her tell Neal about who her father was and what he fought for. Throughout her childhood, Sasha remained a smart, motivated kid who "didn't take any crap" as her mother says. Just months after he was buried, a teacher denied the young Neal the chance to discuss her father as her hero for an assignment. However, Moore fought for the right for her daughter to honor her father.

Neal went on to play basketball like her father. She earned a full academic tuition scholarship to Carson-Newman, but remained true to her dreams of the Army, taking a scholarship with ROTC instead. Her mother remarried and got divorced, and Neal now has two younger brothers, Christian, 17, and Saban, 12. When it came time to help her family out, Neal didn't hesitate to take up a few part-time jobs at restaurants or even the local jewelry store. Even though she's moved on, she still knows her father is her inspiration to it all, and the reason she made the decision as an elementary school child to join the Army.

"A lot of the times when we have an eagle triathlon [at school], I'll tell 'Hey girl you know he would be so proud' and she'll just take off all the way to the finish line." Ashley Rogers, 20, her best friend in Carson-Newman's ROTC program said.

Raelin is one of Neal's middle names, a combination of her parents' first names Raymond and Jamilyn. Physically, however, Moore acknowledges Jones has her beat. Neal is a spitting image of her father. Now that her daughter is all grown up, Moore has no problem with Neal proving she is Jones's daughter to everyone and following in his footsteps.

"I've already done my job, I'm just here to be her friend now. I just pray for God to cover her just as I do my other kids," Moore said. "I want her to do whatever makes her soul happy. If that's the military, then so be it."

Neal is just as satisfied. She still remembers the letters, the few phone calls, and the golden ring with hearts on it that father gave her. She has anticipated joining the Army most of her life, and she is finally in the element of her father.

"I told my mom on the phone the other night, I finally found a place that I belong. I feel at home here," Neal said. "and I don't know these people from Adam. I've only known these people for 11 days, but I feel like there more family than anything."



Neal's mother and late father when first married.

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